

REFLECTION ARTICLE

A Reflection from the Digital Preservation Coalition on Implementing the Tandanya Declaration in the Rapid Assessment Model

Jenny Mitcham  and Robin Wright 

Digital Preservation Coalition, York, UK and Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

The Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration provided important guidance to the Digital Preservation Coalition (DPC) in the latest revision of the DPC Rapid Assessment model (DPC RAM). The DPC is a collaborative global charity whose members work together to bring about a sustainable future for digital assets. One of its key resources is a maturity modelling tool for digital preservation – the RAM. This reflection explains how elements of the Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration were incorporated into the latest version of the DPC RAM and led to the DPC centring and promoting a more ethical approach to digital preservation within RAM.

Keywords: *Digital preservation; Maturity modelling; Ethics; Good practice; Indigenous Data Sovereignty*

The Digital Preservation Coalition (DPC) is a global community of organisations working together to bring about a sustainable future for digital assets. Our members are brought together by a commitment to developing and sharing expertise on how to implement effective long-term preservation. The DPC provides support for the digital preservation community, and its resources focus on supporting good practice in digital preservation. The DPC established an office in Naarm, Melbourne, Australia, in 2020 and now has 28 members across Australasia and Asia-Pacific.

In 2023, the Australian Federal Government released its new National Cultural Policy ‘Revive’.¹ The report aimed to direct the next 5 years of Australian cultural development and contained a national commitment to ‘placing the stories and cultures of First Nations communities at the heart of everything we do’.² The DPC saw that digital preservation would play an important role in delivering this cultural commitment. The work of First Nations academics, researchers and practitioners³ had also drawn our attention to the challenges faced by memory organisations established on colonial models of archival practice when dealing with Indigenous material. The DPC was concerned that these practices should not enter the emerging

*Correspondence: Jenny Mitcham, Email: Jenny.Mitcham@dpconline.org

digital world unchallenged and was committed to listening to our Indigenous colleagues to learn about the changes needed in our own practices and across the wider digital preservation environment to address these problems. It was also recognised that, as a legacy of colonialism, many DPC members outside Australia held Indigenous cultural materials in their collections, and thus we had an opportunity to influence curatorial practices beyond Australia.

The Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration (Tandanya Declaration)⁴ had been released by the International Council on Archives (ICA) Expert Matters Indigenous Group in 2019. It called for a ‘remodeling of traditional archival principles’ and for organisations to ‘challenge colonial ideologies in the archival setting’. The requirements of the Tandanya Declaration and the principles asserted in the 2018 Indigenous Data Sovereignty Summit Communique⁵ were increasingly being incorporated into policies and protocols adopted by Australian cultural institutions.⁶

In 2023, the DPC held a series of digital preservation workshops with member organisations in Australia and New Zealand. In a workshop at the offices of the Queensland State Archives (QSA) in Brisbane, there was a panel session with a presentation by Dr Rose Barrowcliffe,⁷ the inaugural First Nations Archives Advisor at the QSA, who was then leading a key change to archival processes and providing access to Indigenous material within the organisation. The presentation by Dr Barrowcliffe was an opportunity for the DPC to listen to what was being done to incorporate Indigenous voices into archival practice and consider the place of digital preservation resources within this process. As a result, the DPC decided it would begin a process to address these concerns and the call for action contained in the Tandanya Declaration as part of the planned 2024 revision of its key digital preservation tool, the Rapid Assessment Model (RAM).

Introducing DPC’s Rapid Assessment Model

The Digital Preservation Coalition’s Rapid Assessment Model (DPC RAM) is a resource providing information and practical direction, which enables organisations to conduct a self-assessment of their digital preservation capability. It was developed in 2019 as part of a collaborative project between the DPC and the UK Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA). A key element of the project was to develop a methodology for measuring progress as the NDA established digital preservation policies and workflows. To do this, the DPC developed a widely applicable digital preservation maturity model called the RAM. The model was built on a Digital Preservation Maturity Model originally published by Adrian Brown in 2013.⁸ It is divided into 11 sections. The first six describe organisational capabilities (covering issues such as organisational viability, policy and strategy and IT capability), and the last five describe service level capabilities (focusing on the more technical elements of digital preservation, such as metadata management, bitstream preservation and discovery and access). For each of these sections, the user of the model is encouraged to reflect on their maturity and assign a level, which ranges from ‘minimal awareness’ to ‘optimised’. The resource includes downloadable worksheets, provides examples and links to further information and enables users to output visualisations of their results.

The first version of the RAM was complete and launched in 2019 at the iPRES conference in Amsterdam.⁹ It was very much a collaborative community effort; however, it was recognised that the model would need to evolve over time as the community grew and good practice in digital preservation continued to emerge. In 2021, after DPC RAM had been in circulation and use for over a year, it was revised and updated to version 2. The edits focused on increasing clarity and consistency and adding more examples to the model.¹⁰ The model was expanded to include new areas such as environmental sustainability and user needs. The *Legal basis* section

was extended to include adherence to ethical codes as well as laws and regulations, but the title of the section was not altered to reflect this.

DPC RAM and the Tandanya Declaration

Having a presence in Australasia and Asia-Pacific meant that the DPC was increasingly exposed to issues influencing archival practice in the region. The DPC always hoped that this would challenge and change our understanding of good practice for digital preservation. A series of visits to Australia and Aotearoa, New Zealand, by DPC staff and the growing influence of Australasian members expanded our understanding of the importance of Indigenous Data Sovereignty¹¹ and the associated issues faced by archives and other collecting organisations in the region. The panel discussion held at the QSA in 2023, exploring the impact of the Tandanya Declaration, led to the DPC having an improved understanding of the issues and the needs of Indigenous communities.

Other activities and initiatives, taking place outside of Australasia, reinforced and added to the picture. In particular, the work of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation in Canada in preserving and providing access to records relating to the history and legacy of the Canadian residential school program, which was awarded the Research Data Alliance Award for the Most Outstanding Digital Preservation Initiative in Commerce, Industry and the Third Sector at the Digital Preservation Awards in 2022.¹² This project created a digital infrastructure and work plan for the preservation of its digital holdings to make these materials meaningfully available to Indigenous communities in support of the rights and dignity of Indigenous peoples.

As a result of these insights, the DPC recognised a significant gap in our resources in relation to the latest thinking on Indigenous Data Sovereignty. The wider industry discussion around the Tandanya Declaration and the importance of Indigenous Data Sovereignty in Australia and Aotearoa, New Zealand, showed us that despite the inclusion of ethical issues in version 2 of the RAM, there was a need for further development and a stronger impetus to address concerns around archival processes and First Nations content, access and representation within organisations engaged in digital preservation.

The DPC became aware that insights from the Tandanya Declaration could help to provide not only guidance on how to do digital preservation better but also on how to improve the tools we use to evaluate how well we are doing digital preservation, particularly the DPC RAM, which was due for revision again in 2024.

An Ethical Review of RAM

The methodology used when revising DPC RAM to version 3 was different from the previous revision, with the Tandanya Declaration providing the biggest influence on the process. The DPC team drew extensively on the wording of the Tandanya Declaration to revise the resource, considering the problems identified in the Declaration around existing archival practices based on colonial assumptions about preservation, description and access to knowledge and culture.

Initial work focused on a thorough review of the Tandanya Declaration, taking each of the points in turn and considering whether there were learnings that could be incorporated into RAM. The CARE principles for Indigenous Data Governance provided additional input into this work.¹³

As work progressed on a further revision of DPC RAM to align it with the Tandanya Declaration, it became apparent that this wouldn't be a straightforward mapping. DPC RAM provides a broad and high-level framework to articulate what digital preservation good practice looks like and enables organisations to reflect on their current capabilities and set targets to improve. However, it does not include all the finer details of implementing every aspect

of digital preservation. When revising the model, it was necessary to strike the right balance between a high-level framework and precise detail, concisely articulating the most important concepts and themes rather than trying to incorporate every element.

Another challenge for us is related to one of the original guiding principles of RAM – that RAM should be applicable to any organisation with content of long-term value, regardless of sector or geographic location. DPC RAM is used around the world in many different contexts, and we worked to generalise and translate the principles of the Tandanya Declaration to ensure they would be widely applicable around the world without diluting their value. For example, some organisations (such as the NDA for whom RAM was initially designed) may not specifically deal with Indigenous Data Sovereignty in their daily activities. But their work is still likely to relate to marginalised community groups or other parties, and they will benefit from a framework that supports them to work ethically and respectfully with these groups and their digital materials. The ethical review of DPC RAM using the Tandanya Declaration as an inspiration has helped us to build the human perspective into DPC RAM in a way that can be applied widely, regardless of context or geographic location. As Paul Wheatley has explained ‘We wanted to specifically reference the preservation and management of content created by or about Indigenous people, but at the same time also make the RAM examples relevant to content by or about many other communities around the world. Particularly those communities that have also had their voices silenced or misrepresented by wider society’.¹⁴

As noted above, the previous revision of RAM had expanded the *Legal basis* capability section of RAM to include ethical issues as well as legal ones. But as we moved towards creating version 3, with the Tandanya Declaration as a guide, we knew this section would need further development. One of the key changes of this revision became a fuller and more obvious embedding of ethical issues into this section, reflected in the change of title from *Legal basis* to *Legal and ethical*. This was perhaps the most noticeable change to the model, ensuring that ethical issues were more prominent within that capability. There were, however, many more changes with the inclusion of new and revised examples across a range of RAM capabilities. As well as the *Legal and ethical* section, there were also edits and additions to the *Policy and strategy*, *Bitstream preservation*, *Metadata management* and *Discovery and access* capabilities. It is not the intention of this paper to discuss all the changes to RAM, which stemmed from this review, but by way of illustration, this paper includes some examples of changes made and the direct influence of the Tandanya Declaration on this revision.

Several changes were made to the *Legal and ethical* section of RAM to align it more closely with the broad themes of the Tandanya Declaration. These include the need to identify parties with legal rights and responsibilities or other forms of custodianship of digital content (e.g., Indigenous rights or community ownership) and the importance of trusted and collaborative relationships with custodians of Indigenous or community content.

In the *Policy and strategy* capability of RAM, a new example was included under the Optimised section of the model as follows:

‘A process has been established to assess, plan and return content (e.g. where ownership or custodianship is questioned).’

This was directly influenced by Section 2b of the Tandanya Declaration, stating that ‘the process of defending intangible cultural heritage must be placed in the stewardship of the elders, knowledge keepers and Indigenous representatives from the communities where the “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills” originated, not the nation states responsible for the assimilation and erasure of their cultures; this recognition includes the replevin of archival materials when requested by the originating community’.

At the optimised level of the *Metadata management*, a new capability was created as follows:

‘Content description of, or about, Indigenous or marginalized communities is authored in collaboration with them.’

This was a response to Section 3b of the Declaration, noting that ‘Indigenous social authority must participate as collaborators and co-authors in the description of records in the custody of public archival institutions whenever those records directly concern the identity of a particular Indigenous community’.

The *Discovery and access* capability of RAM also included a number of new examples, recognising that as noted in Section 4 of the Declaration, access to archival records is ‘a socially mediated process and a conceptual site of conflict between European and Indigenous ways of knowing’. Section 4c of the Declaration recognises that ‘access to records containing traditional Indigenous cultural expression, sacred belief, social and legal knowledge must recognise and apply the social, legal and cultural protocols of the affiliated communities. This should be done in consultation with the affiliated community’. The *Discovery and access* capability of RAM was therefore edited to reflect this, with a new example included at the Managed level of RAM stating that ‘Access to content of, or about, Indigenous or other communities is informed by relevant social, legal and cultural protocols and is mediated in consultation with the community’.

The fact that these revisions touched so many sections of the model showed the relevance of ethical considerations across multiple areas of digital preservation practice and strengthened the overall messages that arose from the DPC’s engagement with the Tandanya Declaration.

Once we had a clear idea of the proposed changes to DPC RAM, we consulted with regional and Indigenous representatives to ensure that we had interpreted and translated the principles correctly. We were very grateful to receive constructive feedback from Indigenous community representatives, and the model subsequently went through a final round of revisions with the DPC community in response to the comments received.¹⁵

Conclusion

The expansion of the DPC in Australasia since the initial development of DPC RAM has provided the DPC and the wider international digital preservation community with an opportunity to learn and benefit from emerging archival good practice from Australia and Aotearoa, New Zealand. The DPC’s 2024 revision of RAM has translated and generalised concepts from the Tandanya Declaration to centre a more ethical approach to digital preservation, foregrounding the more human aspects of our work. A new understanding of the importance of social and cultural rights and responsibilities and consultation with Indigenous and other marginalised communities is now included as a key part of the RAM.

Currently available in nine different languages, we know that DPC RAM is used widely across the global digital preservation community. Through the inclusion of ethical considerations derived from the Tandanya Declaration, users of the model are encouraged to consider how the guidance derived from the declaration can be applied to the communities that they work with. We anticipate that digital preservation activities across the world will be fairer, more ethical and more human centred as a result.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge and thank Paul Wheatley for leading the ethical review of DPC RAM and the Indigenous and regional community representatives, including

Associate Professor Kirsten Thorpe, Ms Kathleen Smeaton and Ms Tui Raven who kindly provided feedback on our proposed edits to the model.

Notes on Contributors

Jenny Mitcham is Chief Digital Preservation Officer at the Digital Preservation Coalition. She works closely with the members of the Coalition on their digital preservation challenges, as well as organising events and producing publications and other resources to help the community move forward with their digital preservation goals. As one of the original co-authors of the DPC's Rapid Assessment Model, co-chair of the NDSA Levels of Digital Preservation Steering Group and a member of the CoreTrustSeal Assembly of Reviewers, she has a particular interest in certification and maturity modelling. She is interested in finding ways of lowering the barriers to digital preservation for those who are just getting started in this field, as well as promoting and encouraging good practice. Social media: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jenny-mitcham-205b406a/>.

Robin Wright is the Head Australasia and Asia-Pacific for the Digital Preservation Coalition and has a particular interest in the intersection of copyright law and digital technologies. She has worked in libraries and legal services in the tertiary sector and as a Research Fellow at the Centre for Media and Communications Law at Melbourne Law School. Robin has managed several digital research projects involving GLAM and educational organisations, is on the board of the Australian Digital Alliance and is Co-Lead of Creative Commons Australia. Social media: www.linkedin.com/in/robin-wright-8560a351.

Notes

1. Commonwealth of Australia, *Revive: A Place for Every Story, a Story for Every Place*, Australian Government, Canberra, 2023, available at: <https://www.arts.gov.au/what-we-do/new-national-cultural-policy>, accessed 08 May 2026.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
3. Kirsten Thorpe, Monica Galassi, Lauren Booker, Tracy Barber, 'Challenging the Silences: Leading Change to Support Indigenous Representation and Priorities in Australian Libraries', in Nandita S. Mani, Michelle A. Cawley & Emily P. Jones (eds.), *Perspectives on Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Libraries*, IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2023, pp. 124–145. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-7255-2.ch007>; Tui Raven, *Guidelines for First Nations Collection Description*, Australian Capital Territory, Deakin, 2023.
4. International Council on Archives, *Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration*, 2019, available at: https://www.ica.org/app/uploads/2024/01/tandanya_adelaide_declaration_eng.pdf, accessed 08 May 2026.
5. Maïam nayri Wingara, *Indigenous Data Sovereignty Summit Communique, Canberra, Australia*, 2018, available at: <https://www.maïamnayriwingara.org/mnw-resources>, accessed 28 May 2026.
6. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library, Information and Resource Network, Inc., 2005, available at: <https://atsilrn.aiatsis.gov.au/protocols.php>, accessed 08 May 2026.
7. Macquarie University, *Research Portal*, available at: <https://researchers.mq.edu.au/en/persons/rose-barrowcliffe>, accessed 10 October 2025.
8. Adrian Brown, *Practical Digital Preservation: A How-to Guide for Organizations of Any Size*, Facet Publishing, London, 2013.
9. iPRES 2019, *16th International Conference on Digital Preservation*, available at: <https://ipres2019.org/>, accessed 10 October 2025.
10. This blog post describes some of the changes that were introduced to DPC RAM in version 2, <https://www.dpconline.org/blog/dpc-ram-version-2-what-has-changed-and-why>.
11. Maïam nayri Wingara, *Indigenous Data Sovereignty Everywhere...All The Time*, available at: <https://www.maïamnayriwingara.org>, accessed 21 May 2026.
12. Digital Preservation Coalition, *Digital Preservation Awards 2022*, available at: <https://www.dpconline.org/events/digital-preservation-awards/dpa2022>, accessed 10 October 2025.
13. Global Indigenous Data Alliance, *CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance*, available at: <https://www.gida-global.org/care>, accessed 10 October 2025.

14. Digital Preservation Coalition, *Launching the Rapid Assessment Model Version 3*, available at: <https://www.dpconline.org/blog/ramversion3launch>, accessed 10 October 2025.
15. A summary of the changes made to DPC RAM in this revision can be found at, <https://www.dpconline.org/blog/ramversion3launch>.

